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FRENCH FURNITURE.

BY THEODORE CHILD.

ORNAMENTATION IN MARQUETRY AND MOSAIC.

OF all the materials that have been placed at the disposal of man, wood is that of which the preparation offers the least difficulty and demands the least cost. Wood, which is indispensable in almost all our industries, is the material which has been most employed by man in the fabrication of the utensils that are necessary for daily life, as in that of the furniture and objects that his needs and social position require. It lends itself readily to all the transformations to which art desires to subject it; no substance can be more easily carved and the variety of its kind fits it for use in the most diversified manners. Furniture is also, of all human productions, that which gives us the most exact information as to the civilization of different nations who have all wrought it in conformity to the laws of their particular genius and according to the exigencies of their particular climate. In France especially woodwork was always a favorite

vention of wood marquetry and who founded the Italian school of *intarsiatori*, while at the same time others like Lorenzo de Bicci (1450), and Dello (died 1455), increased the richness of their cabinets by the addition of painted panels. Several of these painted cabinets exist in the collection of M. Henri Cernuschi.

During the Renaissance greater richness

is added to oak and walnut by the application of ornaments of paste gilded and painted, a kind of work found especially in jewel boxes and other small accessories of luxury.

At the end of the sixteenth century the German cabinet makers of Dresden, Augsburg and Nuremberg cover their work with repoussé, silver and precious stones, while in France, towards the same epoch, the walnut furniture is relieved by panels of marble and of ebony. In these attempts at novelty, which were not always characterized by the best taste, we find the germs of the arts of inlaying and of metallic decoration of furniture which were carried to such high perfection in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

According to Albert Jacquemart what the Italians call *tarsia* or marquetry work, is the same as the work

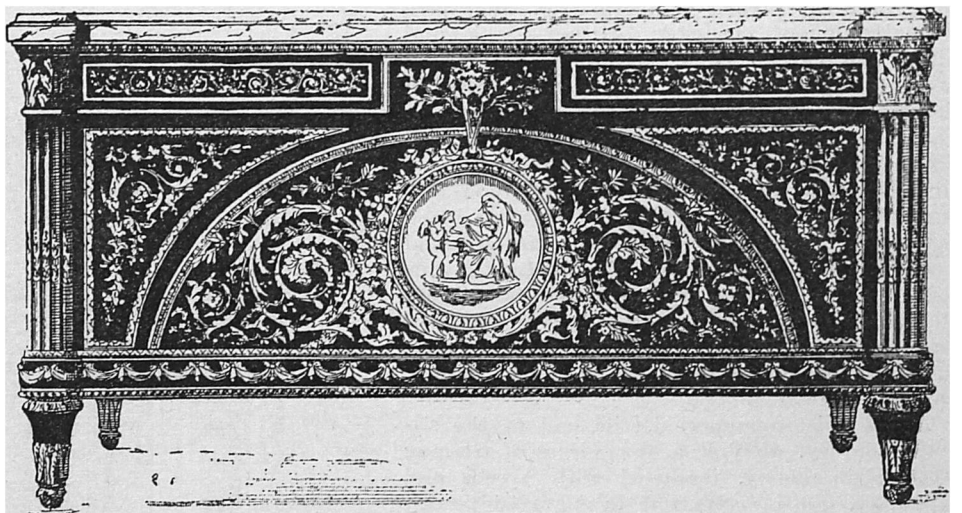
called by Pliny *cerostrotum*, which means a combination of wood inlaid with horn and which corresponds to what is called pique when it comes from the east and *certosino* when it is of Italian origin. The *intarsiatori* or inlayers appear in Italy as early as the thirteenth century. In the sixteenth century the famous inlayers were almost all monks belonging to the

Carthusian orders of Brescia, Rovigo, Bergamo and Verona, and it is presumed that the work owes its Italian name *lavoro alla certosina* Carthusian work or by abbreviation *certosino* (Carthusian), to this fact. The real *certosino* work was first produced at Venice in imitation of Oriental work, and up to the end of the fourteenth century it consisted of black and white woods sometimes relieved with ivory. Later, the ivory was dyed green, and woods of various colors were employed and the ornamentation was extended from coffers, caskets and small articles to cabinets, cupboards, chairs and other large pieces of furniture. The designs are generally purely geometrical—checkers, lozenges, circles, etc., sometimes varied with medallions containing flowers and vases and borders of foliage and arabesques. This kind of work was imitated by the Venetians from objects of Persian and Indian origin, and the commercial relations of Portugal with India at this time account for the existence of similar pieces of furniture in the Spanish peninsula. I need not say that *pique* work is still in favor in India and Persia at the present day.

This earlier Italian inlaid work in geometrical patterns was followed early in the sixteenth century by figure designs executed at first in two or three woods only, usually pine and cypress. The large grain was employed to express lines of drapery and other movements, by putting whole portions of a dress or figure with the grain in one direction or another as required. The subjects mostly chosen were perspective representations of buildings, full of windows and angular lines, to which force and relief are given by means of lights and shades, but the finest *tarsia* work is rather that where the design is a decorative composition and not a picture. The picture in mosaic partakes rather of the character of a *tour de force* and of a mere curiosity rather than of a work of art.

Certain Turkish and Arab work deserves to be mentioned in connection with this subject; it is a mosaic of wood, ivory, mother of pearl, and tortoise shell, employed in the mirrors, stools, tables, and coffers of these Oriental countries with great effect.

A great revolution was created in furniture by



COMMODOE, WITH PORCELAIN MEDALLIONS.

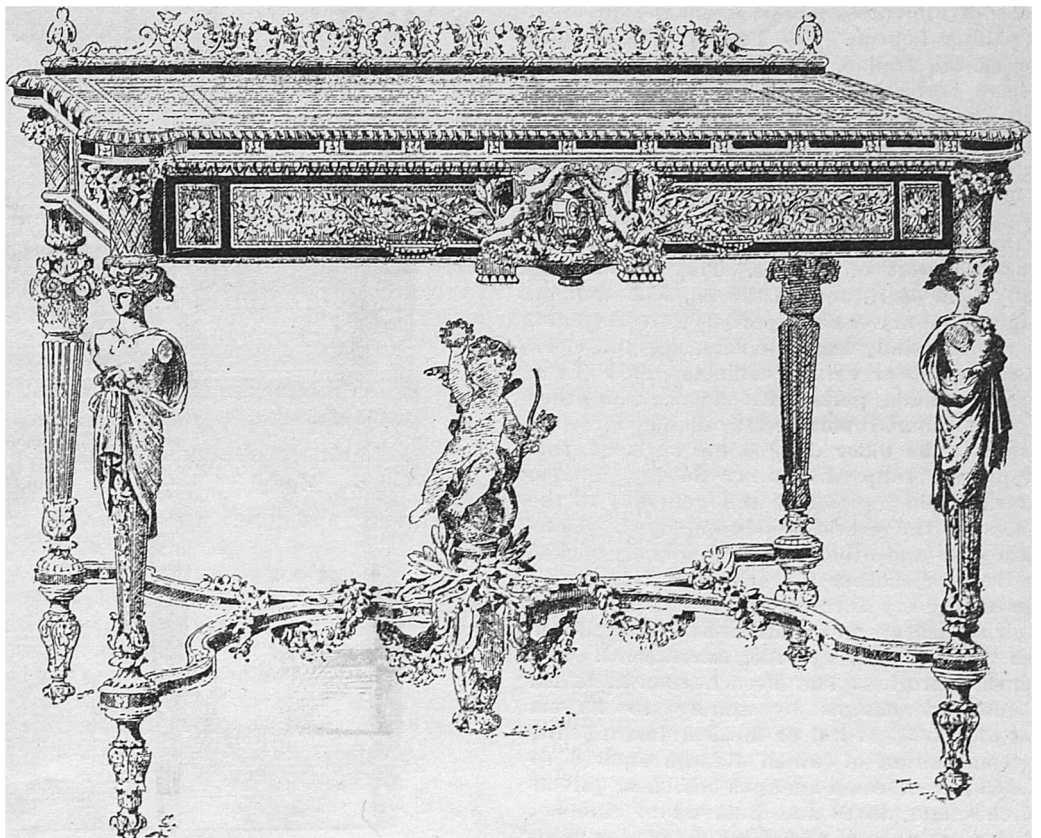


BOULE WORK, EBONY WITH MARQUETERIE.

art because it enabled the artist to translate completely and to execute rapidly his composition. Beginning with the great sculptors in wood of the middle ages, and the wonderful carvers of the Renaissance, and ending with the skillful cabinet makers and wood carvers of the last two centuries and their imitators in the present, France has produced a long succession of artists whose works have taken place amongst the finest creations of decorative composition.

In the history of French furniture we have to take into account two influences: that of the material, and that of the individual artist or school of artists, whether native or foreign. As civilization advances, as commerce and discovery progress, and as the qualities and capacities of materials become better known, the kinds of raw material become more diversified and the furniture more complicated in make. Wood in its simple and natural state no longer suffices, and the solid carving of the Renaissance is succeeded by veneer and marquetry. Furthermore wood itself gradually loses its supremacy in the fabrication of furniture, and ends by taking a secondary place as the mere basis for the metallic mosaics of Boulle and the bronze master-pieces of Gouthière. It is to the study of this development of wood marquetry and these marriages of metal and wood that I propose to devote a few remarks.

The *meuble de luxe*, as we understand it, must not be looked for much before the fifteenth century. Previous to that date the furniture was scant, massive, and architectural in design, and strongly built of oak. Life in feudal Europe did not admit of refined elegance, and all objects of luxury were designed so as to withstand the wear and tear of rough removal from castle to castle and even from camp to camp. But in the middle of the fifteenth century we find artists who, no longer content with rich architectural compositions combined with statuary, began to put color into furniture, and amongst them are the Italians Benedetto and Giuliano de Maiano, who are credited with the in-



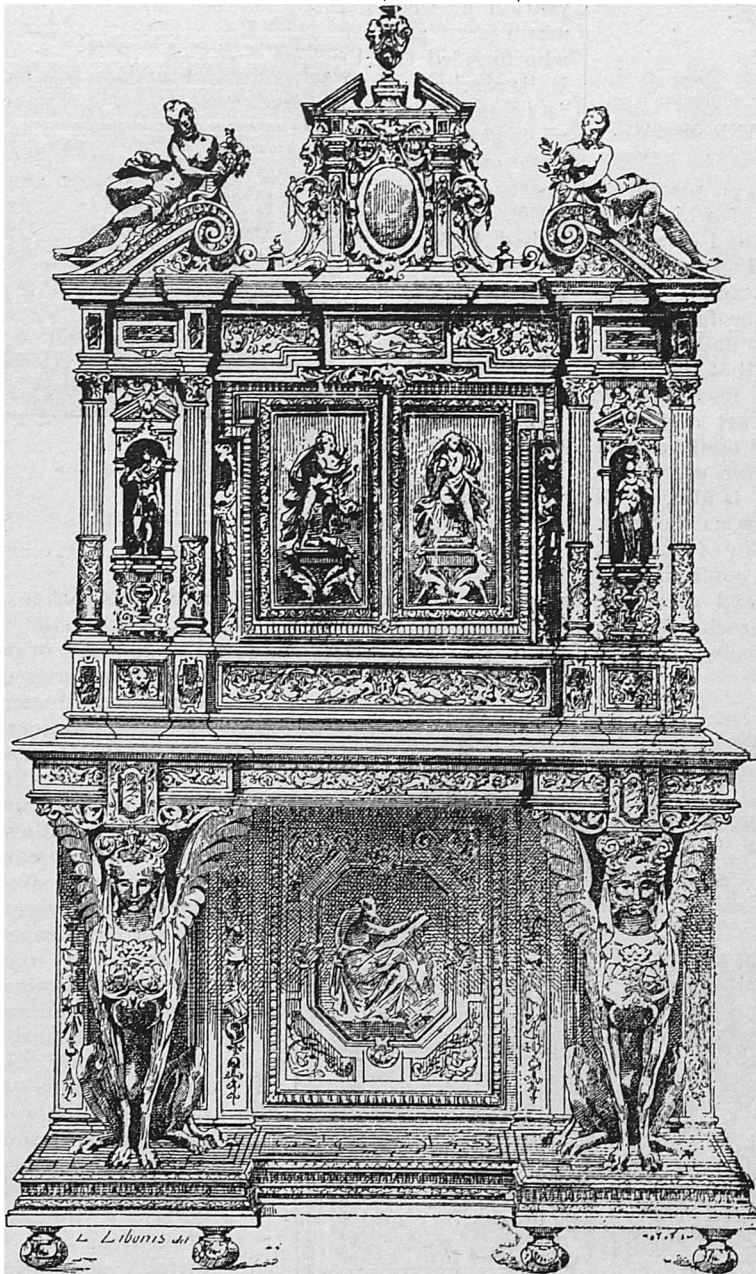
LOUIS XVI. BOUDOIR TABLE, INCRUSTED WITH GOLD AND SILVER AND FEET OF GOLD BRONZE.

the introduction of ebony, that funereal wood which gave the French cabinetmakers their professional name of *ébénistes*. Hitherto oak and walnut had sufficed, and, besides lending themselves readily to carving, they had supplied a suitable ground for incrustations of colored woods of all kinds and precious marbles of the brightest colors. Then suddenly we find ebony in the field and it is Italy that first works this wood and adorns it with the incrustations of white on black ground, which are called *scagliola*, most funereal of combinations. Nevertheless the furniture of this epoch—end of the sixteenth century—is delicate and charming in taste, and the incrustations of ivory completed by engraving are of the most exquisite finesse and of the highest artistic quality.

About this same period, the end of the sixteenth century, we find a few pieces of German furniture in ebony, incrustated with scrolls and arabesques, not in ivory but in engraved pewter or tin, a sort of anticipation of Boule work.

The Renaissance, as we have seen, was not content to seek elegance in the form and mere workmanship of its furniture. The splendid sculpture and architectural contours of its cabinets and credences were enriched by tablets and panels and medallions of marble of various forms and colors. In Italy this idea was carried to excess, and the panels of cabinets, table tops, clock cases, etc., were transformed into veritable mosaics in *pietra dura*. The materials used in this expensive mosaic are the precious marbles, such as agate, cornelian, lapis lazuli, or amethyst, each part being ground to an exact shape and the whole fitted accurately together. This beautiful and difficult kind of ornamentation took the name of Florentine mosaic, Florence being the town where the art was most successfully cultivated. The transformation of the piece of wooden furniture into a veritable mosaic can be easily followed in specimens that may be seen in various private and public collections. First of all the cabinets of walnut or of ebony were enriched with columns or colonettes of lapis or jasper, with gilt bronze bases and capitals; the compartments of the drawers and the panels between the colonettes were decorated with oval or polygonal medallions of agate, cornaline, jasper, or lapis, which in their turn were enriched with gilt moldings. The next step made the wood, whether walnut or ebony, a mere ground or framework in which these mosaics were mounted. This Florentine mosaic, it must be remarked, is very different from the old Roman mosaic in cubes of approximately the same dimensions. The Florentine work consisted of pieces cut out of marble of a color as near as possible to that of the object to be represented; a bird, for instance, would have its body executed in finely veined brownish marble and its wings or neck in cornaline or jasper; cherries will be imitated in cornaline and the modeling of the fruit will be obtained by choosing a piece of stone in which the red passes into white, or by manipulating the stone with a hot-iron, heat having an effect on the color of certain stones. A fine cabinet of this Florentine work is to be seen in the Cluny Museum at Paris and some French mosaics of the same description may be seen in the Louvre Museum. These latter were executed at the Gobelins Manufactory, where Louis XIV. founded an *atelier* of Florentine mosaic under the direction of the painter Lebrun. The French work is quite as fine as the Italian, and the elements of the work have been chosen with equal patience and skill, in proof of which statement I will remind the reader of one table on which is represented in mosaic a map of France with all the names of places minutely incrustated.

Throughout the seventeenth century wood marquetry became the leading feature of furniture all over the west of Europe. The Dutch were especially fond of it, and in the reign of William and Mary the art was imported into England, together with bandy legged chairs, upright clock fronts, *secrétaires* or writing cabinets closed in the upper and middle parts with doors, and other pieces that offered surfaces available for such decoration. The older designs on work of this kind represent tulips and other flowers, foliage, birds, etc., all in gay colors and generally in the self colors of the exotic woods employed. Sometimes the eyes and other salient points are picked out in ivory or mother-of-pearl. The Dutch and German marquetry furniture is not so artistic in design or so delicate in execution as that produced by the French during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The French soon increased their stock of designs by adding to flowers trophies of warlike, rural or musical instruments, in the composition of which Ranson showed so much skill; then came amorous emblems, quivers and torches and doves and bunches of ribbons; and to these were soon added figures of shepherds



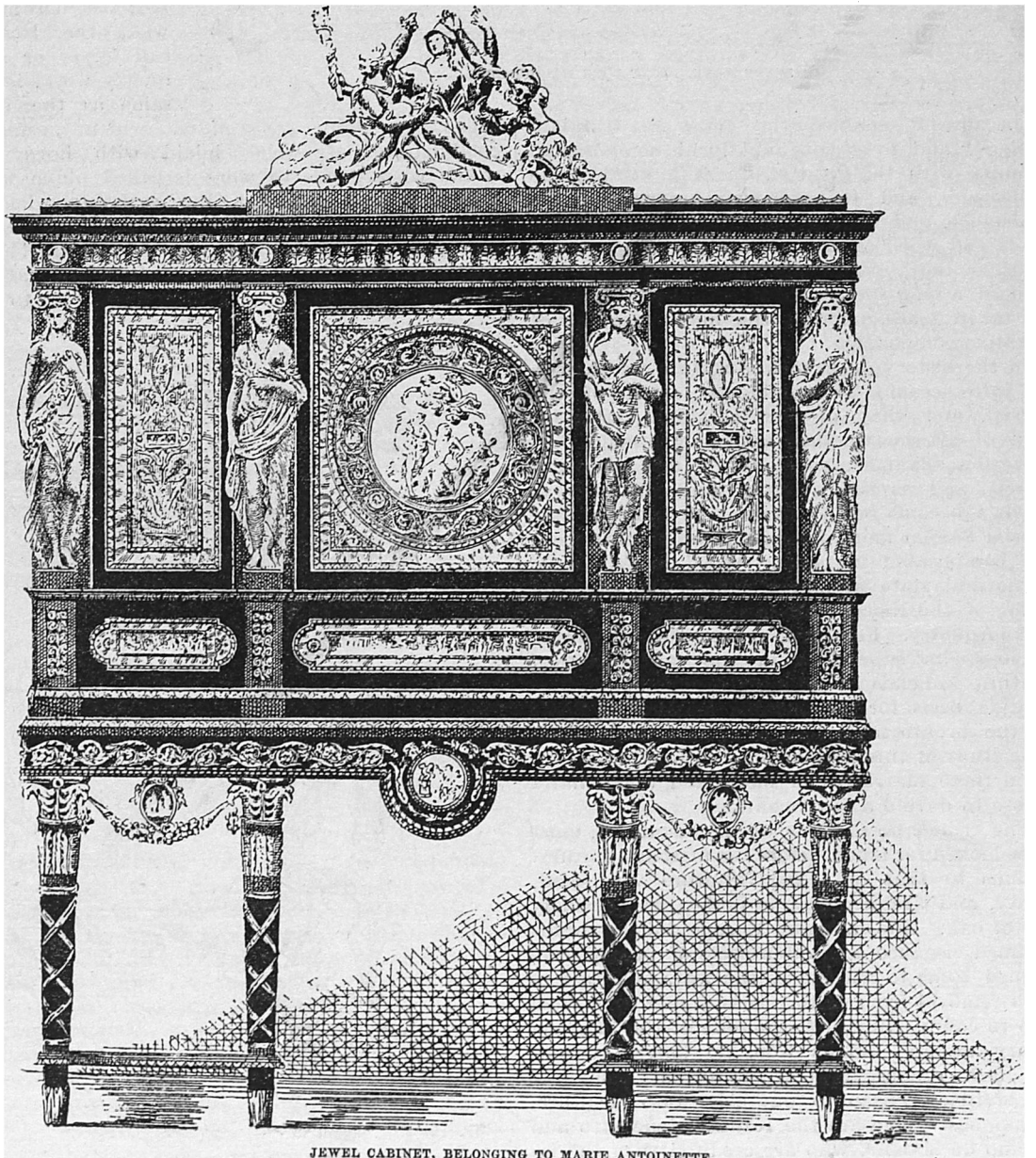
RENAISSANCE CABINET, IN OAK, WITH MOSAIC.

and shepherdesses in sylvan groves, and in the end the panels and sides of cabinets and commodes and the tops of tables were invaded by the fauna and flora and sylvia as well as by the

drawing, the lines thus produced were filled with black mastic and the finishing touches of color given by the application of staining matter as hot as possible, to make it penetrate into the wood.

personages of Watteau, Boucher and the painter of the *fêtes galantes*. The two artists whose names we know who excelled in marquetry were David and his contemporary Riesener, who was born about 1730. Riesener was much employed by Marie Antoinette, and he was famous for his marquetry panels, adorned with graceful groups of flowers and fruits, sometimes of figures, executed with the utmost delicacy and precision of workmanship, and with the tints of the various woods perfectly arranged. In the Jones Collection at South Kensington a fine marquetry commode is signed Denizot.

In wood marquetry one of the principal difficulties to be overcome was to obtain the modeling which should give the appearance of reality. The means employed then as now are acids and fire. In order to shade wood the pieces were plunged in a bath of fine river sand, heated to a degree sufficient to brown the fibre without burning it. The acids mentioned in the old technical treatises are (1), corrosive sublimate dissolved in lime water; (2), spirits of nitre, and (3), oil of sulphur. The acids were applied to the wood with a brush or a feather and the application repeated until the required shading was obtained. The stain was generally applied cold to the wood, and was manipulated in such a manner as itself to aid in the design. Thus while the wood was still pale it was taken out of the bath and the parts that the artist desired to keep pale were covered with wax to protect them from the effect of the acid, and the wood was then replunged in the bath. When the marquetry design was complete a few strokes of the etching point relieved the



JEWEL CABINET, BELONGING TO MARIE ANTOINETTE.